

Undiscovered Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 May - 1 June 2018

Report compiled by Marcus John



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Introduction

This tour to Iceland is timed to coincide with the return of a range of very special birds to their Icelandic breeding grounds. We enjoyed good views of all the iconic species like Harlequin Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye, Great Northern Diver and the majestic Gyrfalcon. But Iceland offers much more than this; it combines stunning landscapes and extraordinary geological phenomena with a real sense of wilderness. It is a privilege to spend time watching Red-throated Divers on their nest, whilst diminutive Red-necked Phalaropes spin and feed at your feet, wary only of the occasional Arctic Skua as it flies overhead.

Our route took us along the scenic south coast of Iceland to reach Skaftafell, calling in at the towering waterfalls of Seljalandsfoss and Skogafoss. One of the highlight of the tour was our visit to the awe-inspiring Jokulsarlon glacier lagoon, where white and blue icebergs break off the glacier and float out past a black sand beach. Habitats are surprisingly varied, from the birch woodland of Skaftafell National Park to the isolated headland of Ingolshofdi, home to an important Great Skua colony and thousands of Puffins. After three nights here, we headed up the east coast to Djupivogur, a charming fishing village with a superb wetland, which lies within walking distance of our hotel. Then we drove across the highlands to reach our ultimate destination at Lake Myvatn. Here, the shallow waters provide abundant food; the variety of birds is matched by their abundance and close encounters with iconic species are all but guaranteed. Finally, a memorable whale watching trip from Husavik completed a superb tour.

Day 1

Thursday 24th May

Flights were on time and everyone arrived safely at the popular Northern Light Inn. This hotel has a most unusual location, situated in the middle of a black rocky plain and next to a big geothermal power station! It is only a short drive from the airport, the rooms are large and very comfortable, and the food is excellent.

Day 2

Friday 25th May

The group met before breakfast with tour leader Marcus John, who outlined the arrangements for the tour and the itinerary for the first full day. After a satisfying buffet breakfast, we packed our bags and drove to the harbour at nearby Grindavik. This is one of Iceland's most important fishing ports and so we were able to hone our gull identification skills, separating Glaucous and Iceland Gulls as they sat close by on the harbourside.

We headed east along the new coast road towards Hveragerdi, the hot springs capital of Iceland. As we left Grindavik we drove past an Arctic Tern colony and further down the road, we stopped to scan Lake Hlidarvatn. Here we saw family groups of Whooper swans which were joined by a range of commoner wildfowl including a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers. Where the road crossed the river that flows out of the lake, we found several summer-plumaged waders including Golden Plover, Turnstone, Sanderling and, best of all, Red-necked Phalaropes. Just as we were leaving, we spotted a group of ducks swimming under the bridge - our first Harlequins!

After a coffee break in Hveragerdi, we drove on to the famous waterfall of Seljalandsfoss, which cascades down between green grassy slopes. The cliffs here are home to dozens of nesting Fulmars, whilst Snipe and Redshank flew around the adjacent fields. Only 30 minutes along the ring road is the even more powerful waterfall of Skogafoss; some of the group climbed up the steep steps to enjoy the view from the top. Again, Fulmars and displaying waders were all around us.

After an excellent lunch in the Gamla Fljosid (“Old Cowshed”) café, we continued east along the main ring road towards Skaftafell. We broke our journey with a visit to Reynisfjara, near Vik. We walked out on the famous black sand beach with crashing surf, impressive basalt columns and tall sea stacks. As well as the inevitable Fulmars, we saw good numbers of Gannets, Guillemots and Puffins. Late afternoon was taken up crossing the awesome “Skeiðarársandur”, the largest glacial outwash plain in the world. It is formed by melt water flowing from Europe’s largest glacier, Vatnajokull. We arrived at our hotel in time to unpack before dinner, where we reflected on what had been a fascinating journey.

Day 3

Saturday 26th May

After a delicious Icelandic buffet breakfast, we drove the short distance to the headquarters of Skaftafell National Park (which has recently been subsumed into the much larger Vatnajokull National Park). We walked through the birch woodland for which the park is famous, though most trees are only about two metres high. Redwings are abundant here and it was lovely to hear them singing all around us and allowing us to approach to within a few metres. At one point we heard a singing Chiffchaff; this is a rarity in Iceland and our sighting was later shared on the Birding Iceland website! We walked along flat ground to the snout of the Skaftafelljokull glacier, where a large lagoon has formed as the glacier retreats. We took time to appreciate the austere but beautiful landscape of whites and greys. Unfortunately, the rain persisted as we made our way back and so we returned to the hotel to eat our lunch.

In the afternoon we drove out onto the black sands to meet our local guide for the tractor ride out to the isolated nature reserve of Ingolfshofdi. It was an amazing journey across six kilometres of vast black sands (mostly covered by the incoming tide), to the remote, rocky cape. Unfortunately, cloud and steady rain obscured our view back towards the coast. Fulmars were wheeling around the cliffs as we climbed up a steep sand bank to the grassy top, where we were able to get very close to several pairs of Great Skua. Up to 3,000 pairs of Puffins also breed and there were burrows everywhere in the short turf. We walked through the rain and around the cliff tops to get closer views of this charismatic species. We were told that the major problem for the Great Skua colony is predation by Arctic Foxes, which walk across the sand to steal eggs. After spending some time admiring Skuas and photographing approachable Puffins, we climbed back into the trailer and returned across the sand. Despite the weather, it had been a fascinating visit to this unique, atmospheric location. We finally drove back to our hotel to relax and dry out our clothes before another excellent dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 27th May

In complete contrast to the previous day, we enjoyed good sunshine and warm temperatures as we set off to Skaftafell National Park to walk to the famous black waterfall of Svartifoss. As we climbed up the steep path, we were serenaded by the ubiquitous Redwings but also found a couple of Icelandic Redpoll, an endemic race of Mealy Redpoll. More exciting for most were two Ptarmigan, one seen on the path, the other in prolonged flight

views. As we reached the highest point, everyone appreciated views of the stunning waterfall, a narrow cascade that falls between cliffs formed by black basalt columns.

After a brief comfort stop at our hotel, we enjoyed the 45-minute drive east, across the sandur (outwash plain), to visit the iceberg lagoon at Jokulsarlon. En route, we stopped at one of the larger roadside pools where we found our first Red-throated Diver, with a small flock of Barnacle geese. When we reached the lagoon, hazy sunshine illuminated dozens of icebergs, many of which were clustered close to the road bridge. We spent some time walking along the lagoon shore to appreciate the beauty of the bergs, in their various shades of white and blue, some opaque, others translucent, a few completely transparent. Common Seals dived for fish between the blocks of ice and several Eider swam close to shore, the males immaculate in their breeding plumage. Gulls and terns flew over the lagoon and loafing on a large iceberg were several Glaucous Gulls. As we set off across the still water for a short ride in the amphibious vehicle, hundreds of Arctic Terns lifted squawking into the air in response to a raiding Great Skua. After that, we walked along the edge of the rocky channel through which the lagoon empties into the sea. A small flock of Purple Sandpipers were very obliging, as were two pairs of Snow Buntings. Down on the beach, several small icebergs were trapped on the black sand; yet another unique photographic opportunity! On the way back to the hotel, we visited the tiny 19th-century, turf-roofed church at Hof, the last one in Iceland built in this style.

Day 5

Monday 28th May

Before breakfast, we walked up behind the hotel to visit the snout of the Svinafellsjokull glacier. This is a dramatic sight, as the steep ice plunges down between sharp ridges from the pure white Vatnajokull high above (but just visible). After climbing over the black gravel of the terminal moraine, we could walk right up to the ice. It was sobering to realise that the impact of global warming is predicted to melt this glacier within a generation.

After breakfast, we packed the vehicle ready for the long drive around to the east coast. We stopped again at Jokulsarlon for one last look at the icebergs, before continuing on to the town of Hofn, where we stopped for supplies (though this took longer than planned thanks to a complicated detour around extensive roadworks!)

Although it was a long drive, the scenery between Hofn and Djupivogur was breathtaking. Snow-capped mountains towered behind craggy cliffs, which gave way to sweeping grassy plains that sloped gently down to the sea. Hundreds of Eider and Whooper Swans were in flocks all along the coast. We enjoyed finding our first summer-plumaged Black-tailed Godwits, with their bright red underparts and yellow/black bills. We also saw several Reindeer; introduced in the 18th century, they look very much at home in this landscape. Picnic areas were in short supply, but we thoroughly enjoyed our late lunch, sitting between rocky slopes and the flat coastal plain.

After checking in to our charming hotel, we went for a walk through a large wetland area just behind the town. Several large pools held a selection of wildfowl including our first Long-tailed Ducks. A little further on, we watched a nesting Red-throated Diver on a tiny islet, only 50 metres from lake shore where we stood. Dozens of Snipe and Golden Plover were calling and displaying, whilst Red-necked Phalaropes chased each other around small pools, almost under our feet! Perhaps the highlight of our evening walk was the Arctic Skuas; at one point we watched four together on the ground, whilst others swooped low overhead. Interestingly, we saw only one dark-phase individual.

The hotel sits right on the picturesque harbour in Djupivogur, where we had ridiculously close views of swimming Fulmar, a good range of gulls and two Black Guillemots. This rounded off a memorable day.

Day 6

Tuesday 29th May

After another good buffet breakfast, we spent the morning around the wetlands once again and saw a total of 12 Red-throated Divers. We also saw several pairs of beautiful Slavonian Grebes and our only Cormorant of the tour. A solitary Grey Heron was a second rarity that we reported to Birding Iceland!

The next leg of our journey took us further up the east coast, before the ring road turned inland towards Egilsstadir. It climbed quite steeply up and turned to gravel for most of the next 50 kilometres, before descending through a fertile valley partially covered in conifer plantations. The sun was shining, and it felt very warm when we stopped for coffee in Egilsstadir. In fact, we recorded our highest temperature of the tour, 21°C!

The next part of our journey was arguably the most memorable, taking us right up and over the north-east highlands before descending down to Myvatn. In this haunting yet austere landscape breeds one of the iconic birds of Iceland - the Pink-footed Goose. We saw several that were just back on territory and small flocks occasionally flew over our vehicle.

We stopped for lunch by the little known but amazing waterfall of Rjukandafoss - if this were close to Reykjavik it would be visited by thousands of tourists! It is a double cascade that thunders down into a small white-water ravine. We continued on until we reached the wide, rocky plateau over which the Viking settlers of the east coast would travel on their way to the parliament at Thingvellir. We were driving alongside the small cairns that have been rebuilt to commemorate this route when a small raptor shot across in front of us. Luckily, it perched on one of the cairns and we were able to identify it as a male Merlin. Later, as we drove past the steaming hillside of Namafjall, the majestic Lake Myvatn came into view. A large but mostly shallow lake, it is fed by volcanic vents, which ensures it remains partially ice-free through winter. And in the spring and summer, it provides abundant insect food for the thousands of breeding birds.

After checking into our rooms, we headed straight back out to explore the lake. We soon reached the bridge over the River Laxa, where we found our first Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck, feeding in the fast-flowing water. It was a superb introduction to the wildfowl of Lake Myvatn, which has the greatest diversity of breeding ducks in Europe.

Day 7

Wednesday 30th May

The next morning it was bright and sunny as some of us took a pre-breakfast walk along the shoreline path that starts directly opposite the hotel. In good light, this is a photographers' paradise, with dozens of Red-necked Phalaropes swimming and fighting right beside the gravel banks, Slavonian Grebes displaying and sitting on nests close to the path, while Long-tailed Ducks, Great Northern Divers and Barrow's Goldeneye vie for attention. Add to this the breeding waders and very obliging Arctic Terns and it is hard to know where to look next!

After breakfast, we revisited the Laxa bridge and then drove up the west shore of the lake and out onto the little peninsula where the Fugalsafn (or Bird Museum) is situated. This is another excellent site for wildfowl and we found our first Common Scoters here.

The sun was shining when we arrived in Husavik harbour in good time for our whale-watching trip with North Sailing. After a picnic lunch, we boarded the beautiful wooden trawler; it was so bright and warm that most of us did not wear the thermal suits that were on offer. We had Kittiwakes and lots of Fulmars for company as we set off, then Puffins as we headed out to sea.

Within 20 minutes of leaving the shelter of the harbour, the North Sailing guide saw a spout and, sure enough, we soon had good views of our first Humpback Whale. Soon there were more spouts around the ship and we were lucky to watch as three Humpbacks fed together. They surfaced one after the other and dived in quick succession. Occasionally, they would interact at the surface; on one occasion, a whale showed the entire underside of its fluke as it rubbed against its neighbour. This is very unusual behaviour in Icelandic waters and it all happened approximately 100 metres from the ship. We saw a total of eight Humpbacks during the next two hours, sometimes right next to us! A very successful voyage was rounded off with cinnamon rolls and hot chocolate as we returned to harbour.

Day 8

Thursday 31st May

The warm and sunny weather continued into our last full day around the Myvatn area and we began with a drive to the northern shore, where an elevated viewpoint offers a panoramic view of the entire lake. From here, we continued around the lake, drove through the small town of Reykjahlid (where we bought supplies) and onto the woodland nature reserve of Hofdi, which sits on a low peninsula that protrudes out into the lake. It is very peaceful place where paths meander through dense trees to reveal wonderful views of hidden bays, complete with stacks of volcanic rock. As well as the usual wildfowl, several Redpoll were singing and feeding, and we even found a singing Goldcrest, a very scarce bird in Iceland.

After coffee and cakes at the Vogafjos cafe, we drove back east to visit the mighty waterfall of Dettifoss, the most powerful in Europe. The air was filled with spray which in turn produced a superb rainbow across the sunlit scene. From here, we returned west to the Krafla area, one of the most active volcanic places in the world. We visited the extraordinary boiling mud pools and steaming fumaroles at Namafjall Hverir. The most active fumarole pours a continuous stream of dense steam into the air, giving off a strong sulphurous odour. Some of the small mud pools are fizzing with black water whilst others are more viscous, with large bubbles of oozing mud plopping to the surface - it all adds up to a very unusual experience! Next, we drove up past the Krafla geothermal power-station to the large volcanic caldera of Krafla Viti, where we walked along the rim to admire the large pool of blue-green water that lies in the crater bottom.

It was on the Krafla road that we finally found the national bird of Iceland - the Gyrfalcon. We were busy scanning the rocky ridge about one kilometre to the west of the road when we spied a white speck. We got out to check with scopes and sure enough, it was a pale Gyrfalcon! As we watched, it flew across to catch a bird on the rocky face; from its size, we guessed it was a Ptarmigan. Then to our surprise, it flew a short distance to land next to another Gyrfalcon. We spent some watched the pair interacting at the nest site; what a privilege!

Our last stop was not far from the hotel, at the strange landscape of Dimmuborgir, where a collapsed lava lake has left a rocky depression studded with tall volcanic columns. An interesting way to complete a wonderful day.

Day 9

Friday 1st June

Our last day began with a brief visit to Godafoss, another famous waterfall that lies on the main ring road. We admired the view and found a very obliging Ptarmigan that sat within a few metres of us. We continued our drive to the attractive town of Akureiri, where we stopped by the fjord to briefly look for birds. We saw lots of Eider Ducks, including some tiny ducklings. We enjoyed a pleasant coffee in the quiet and relaxed airport before boarding the plane for our short flight to Reykjavik.

When we landed at the domestic airport, we had time for a coach tour of the capital city, including a quick look inside the famous Hallgrímskirkja church, which dominates the Reykjavik skyline. Too soon, it was time to head across the Reykjanes peninsula to the international airport at Keflavik. After an unexpected and long delay, everyone (except Marcus!) was finally able to board the flight home.

It had been a remarkable tour, combining spectacular scenery and unforgettable wildlife. After a couple of wet days on the south coast, we had enjoyed fantastic sunny weather for most of our time in Iceland. We saw a total of 71 bird species: from the mighty Gyrfalcon to the diminutive Red-necked Phalarope, we had had close views of all the birds that make Iceland such a unique destination.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May - June								
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				1	7	12			
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>					1	1	2	3	
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>						8	20	12	
4	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
5	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		15	1						
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>						1			
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>						1			
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		40	30	50	100	100	100	25	6
9	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						100		8	
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		50	12	20	50	30	30	2	
11	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				31	20	1			
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		2	1	1		20	20	20	2
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		30	10	2	10	10	12	10	8
14	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						4	6	4	
15	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>							6		
16	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					2		2		
17	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					1	2	6	2	
18	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		4							
19	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		50			50	50	100	50	12
20	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>						2	2	6	
21	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		100		50	300	250	30		150
22	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		4				5	12	4	
23	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>					2	7	20	12	4
24	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>							5	4	
25	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>						2	12	14	6
26	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2		2		1	4	2	
27	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			8						
28	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>						1	1		
29	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>								2	
30	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>				2			1	1	
31	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		2				2			
33	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		12		3	15	20	40	20	2
34	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		10				10			
35	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		1							
36	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					2				
37	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		5	6	2	2	2	1	2	
38	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				12	4	3			
39	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1	25	2	6	12	15	8	15	2
40	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>					4	12	6	6	
41	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		25	2	2	5	8	6	6	2
42	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		6			10	60	200	200	50
44	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		10	80	10	8				
45	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		4	1	10	8	5	2	1	
46	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					2	4		2	

	Common name	Scientific name	May - June								
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
48	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		60	2	35	6	1	6		
49	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
50	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		2		8	1		1		
51	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>		1							
52	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓							
54	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		2	100						
56	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			6						
57	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>					2		1		
58	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		40	4				30		
59	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>					1				
60	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>								1	
61	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		6	4	8	2	10	10	10	
63	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H				1	
64	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		4	1			2	1	3	
65	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			H						
67	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>								1	
68	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	4	6							
69	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	20	4	3	10	20	10	4	
70	Mealy Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				2				7	
71	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		1	2	4	2	H		1	

Mammals

1	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					4	2			
2	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>								8	
3	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>						11			